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## **Outside In: Francesca Woodman's Rooms of Her Own**

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Johannes Binotto

## Outside In: Francesca Woodman's Rooms of Her Own

"For behind space, so it will appear, nothing more is given to which it could be traced back. Before space there is no retreat to something else." Martin Heidegger, *Art and Space*

"Had she a room to herself?" Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

"The way things went, I kept trying to change my direction and photograph other things. Man I am as tired as the rest of you of looking at me . . ." Francesca Woodman wrote in a letter quoted by Rosalind E. Krauss.<sup>1</sup> Fully aware of the skepticism with which others would view her obsession with her own body, the photographer nonetheless cannot desist from being preoccupied with it. So Woodman's body, Krauss writes, remains the cornerstone and pivot of her pictures, "the ground of whatever sense the image might make."<sup>2</sup> And indeed as we regard these photographs it seems impossible to disregard the body that produces and stages itself here—a body that is forever striking, wants to be striking, even and especially when it pretends to be hiding. But what if the passage quoted above should also be read as a challenge to us to divert our gaze from Woodman's body and consider what is going on next to, behind, and around it?

Indeed Woodman's photographs always also capture that other; she incessantly switched angles of view and photographed what was beyond her body: the scene of the action, the room itself. That is how we may read apparently neutral titles such as *space*<sup>2</sup> (fig. 3) or *house* and captions like "verticale": as calling on us to turn our attention to the spatial situations in her pictures.

One of these photographs (cat. 15, p. 128) shows a glass display case on a platform; the artist crouches inside, her body pressed against the lateral glass wall. Fascinated by the body putting itself on display here, which seems headless and enigmatically suspended between masculinity and femininity, we may easily overlook the setting. Yet the latter is at least as mysterious as the figure placed at its center: the room is irritatingly out of kilter. The floor reels as though on the high seas, and the box bearing the glass case also threatens to start sliding downward. The play of light and shadow on the floor heightens the impression that something is off about the room. Yet all it took to create this sense of spatial instability was a skillful choice of camera position and angle. In this regard, Woodman, surprisingly, turns out to be a student

1 Rosalind E. Krauss, "Francesca Woodman: Problem Sets," in Ann Gabhart, ed., *Francesca Woodman: Photographic Work*, exh. cat. Wellesley College Museum; Hunter College Art Gallery, New York (Wellesley, MA, 1986), p. 48.

2 Ibid., p. 172.

of the Russian constructivist Alexander Rodchenko, whose photographs of a building in Moscow inspired the Russian photography theorist Ossip Brik to the following remarks, written in 1922: "we must break out beyond the customary radius of the normal human eye. . . . Then we will see our concrete reality . . . as it has never been seen before . . . that familiar object (the house) suddenly turned into a never-before-seen structure, a fire escape became a monstrous object, balconies transformed into a tower of exotic architecture."<sup>3</sup> The real building on which the lens of the camera is trained, Brik argued, is changed profoundly by the simple act of taking a photograph. When the camera breaks out beyond the customary radius, actual architecture is transformed into an impossible structure that defies all laws of structural engineering and geometry.

In another of Woodman's pictures (fig. 1; cat. 36, p. 170) a door that has been lifted off its hinges and seems to float in the air attests to this other spatial reality created through photography's transformative act. We may well know that the door has simply been set against the wall and then photographed from an adeptly chosen angle, but in the picture it looks as though we merely need to move to a different viewpoint for the door to reveal itself as the entrance to another dimension, the portal to another world that projects, tilted and awry, into the room.

Newly sensitive to this space beyond the real architecture, we begin to notice it where it had not struck our eye before. Not only does the door that is out of joint seem to lead into an enigmatic zone, what we see through the empty doorframe in the background similarly becomes ever more baffling the longer we contemplate it. Two further doorways may be seen in the adjoining room. Set at a right angle to each other, these doors would seem to access the same room from different sides. But the two openings are far too close for this sort of layout to make any sense. What sort of room would have an entrance just half a step away from its exit? And the chamber in the background remains obscure in other ways, including literally: although both doors are open, not the least bit of light penetrates the darkness beyond the frames. This space behind the space remains a black void, unfathomable and ultimately unimaginable. It is thus an instance of the radical outside that the philosopher Gilles Deleuze refers to when he speaks of the out-of-field or *hors-champ*. On an initial level, *hors-champ* simply refers to the world outside the camera's field of view. But then we need to distinguish two kinds of *hors-champ*: "in one case, the out-of-field designates that which exists elsewhere, to one side or around; in the other case, the out-of-field testifies to a more disturbing presence, one which cannot even be said to exist, but rather to 'insist' or 'subsist,' a more radical elsewhere, outside homogeneous space and time."<sup>4</sup> Deleuze explains the concept of *hors-champ* in the example of film, but as Philippe Dubois has shown, it concerns the photographic medium at its root: in the "photographic act," a field of view is selected, and by the same token, what is outside this field of view is severed. "Any shot is perforce like a blow of the axe, singling out one piece of reality while rejecting and repressing everything else that surrounds this piece of reality (the *hors-cadre* or *hors-champ*)."<sup>5</sup> But what is thus expelled and excluded

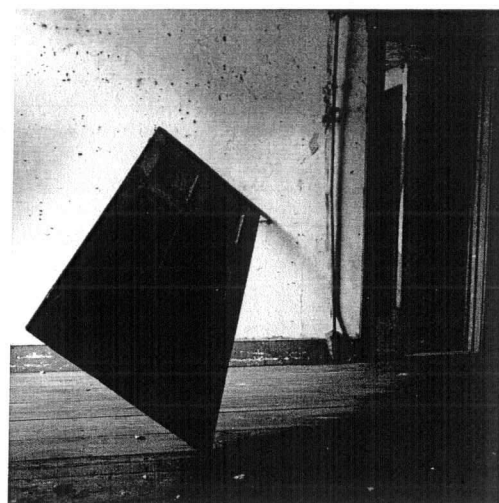


Fig. 1 Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976, black-and-white gelatin silver print on barite paper cat. 36

3 Ossip Brik, "What the Eye Does Not See," in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940* (New York, 1989), p. 220.

4 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (London, 1986), p. 17.

5 Philippe Dubois, *L'Acte photographique* (Paris, 1990), p. 170.

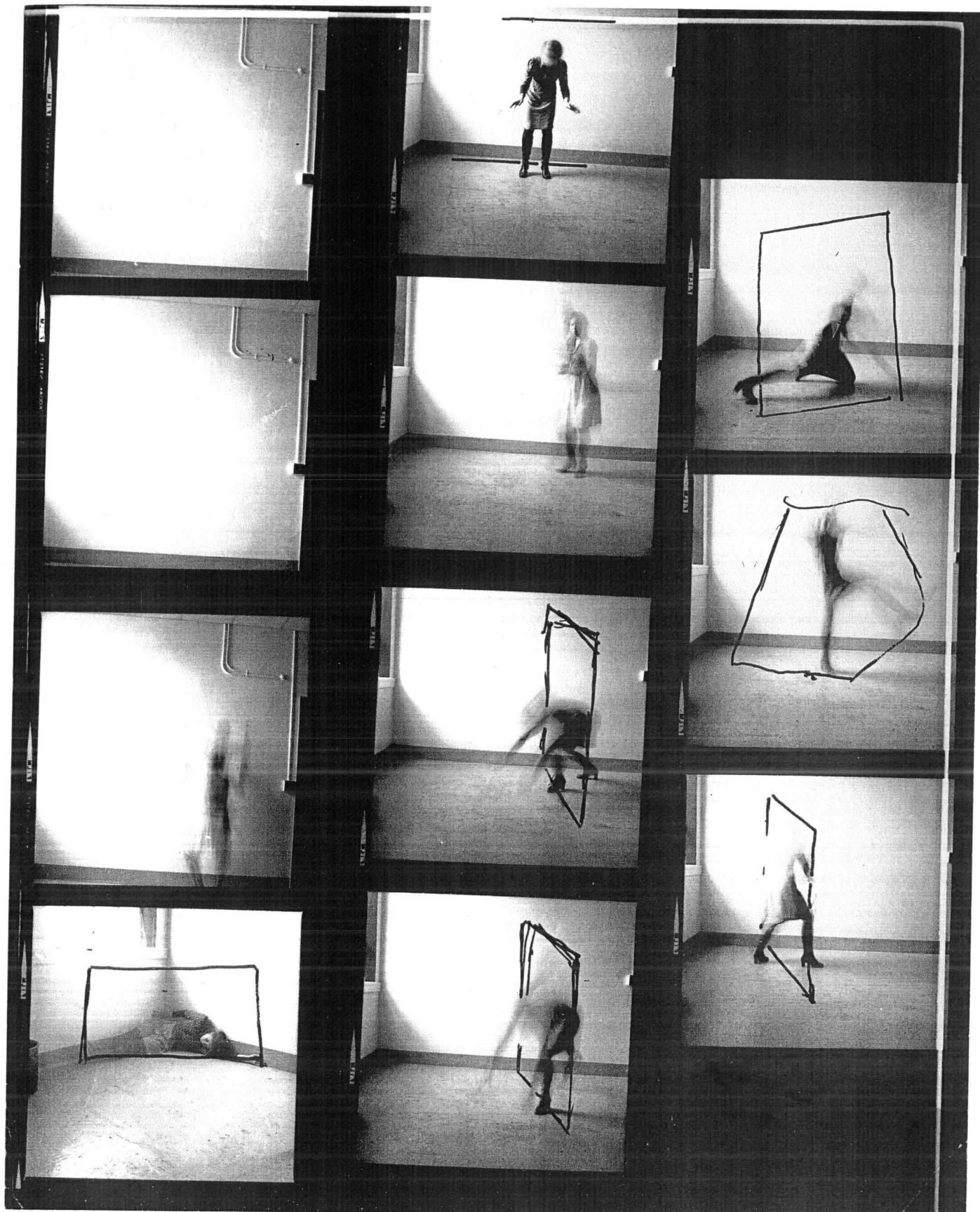


Fig. 2 Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976, black-and-white contact sheet



space²

from the picture is not just the surrounding setting; it may sometimes also take the form of that unimaginable and radical elsewhere that fascinates Deleuze.

The side rooms and exterior spaces we glimpse through door cracks and windowpanes in Woodman's pictures are not just natural extensions of the real space; they do not simply abut the familiar rooms. On the contrary, they seem to constitute a mysterious nowhere, a "radical elsewhere" whose "disturbing presence," though palpable, is unfathomable (fig. 2). This elsewhere also makes itself felt in a picture that shows the artist, stiff-legged and slightly bent forward, turning toward the camera, her head a blurry mass (cat. 30, p. 158). Once again, the fascinating figure threatens to eclipse what is going on with the room. It is only when we divert our gaze from her that we notice a neatly cropped narrow detail along the right edge of the picture: a black window bay. A virtuoso of framing, Woodman has chosen the picture margin so that we see only the dark bay of this window but not the bright windowpane. In the finished photograph, a fascinating paradox results: the window is visible only as a dark area and yet bright light comes in through the dark opening and illuminates the back wall. What emerges along the edge of the picture is an outside in which these contradictions dissolve: an elsewhere, luminous and pitch black at once (fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Francesca Woodman, *space²*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976, black-and-white gelatin silver print on barite paper



Fig. 4 Francesca Woodman, *Angels, Calendar Notebook*, 1978, pages from artist's book

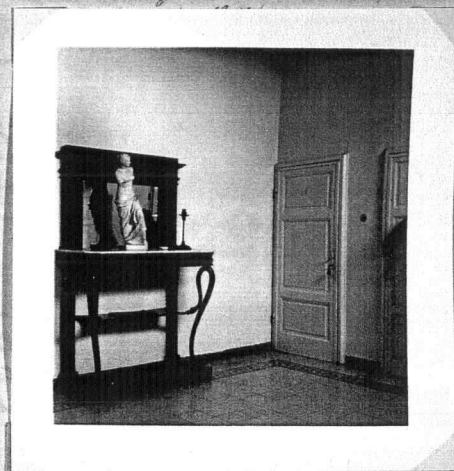
I would like to thank Gabriele Schor for bringing this intriguing picture to my attention.

Le phalène dore dans sa courbe ligne  
D'arçon le plus enroulé.  
Que cherches-tu sur la terre endormie?  
Mais déjà vers le matin je t'ois l'alaison;  
Tu fuis, en tournoyant, mélancolique amie.  
Et ton tourbillon regard est prêt de s'effacer.  
Voile qui descend sur la verte colline,  
Cristal d'argent du matin au delà l'horizon,  
C'est que regarde au loin le pasteur qui chemine,  
L'andé qui pas à pas son long troupeau le suit,  
Voile, ou ton voile dans cette nuit immense?  
Cherches-tu sur la lune un lit dans le ruisseau?  
Ou ton voile si belle en l'heure du silence,  
Tomber comme une pluie au sein profond du caeu?  
A. Mistral.

### Fantômes.

Mais que j'en ai vu mourir de jeunes filles de  
..... (line 1)  
Sous fantômes! c'est là, quand j'étais dans l'air,  
Qu'il venait tout à leur insu et me parler;  
Un jour d'automne, me montrant et me cache les ombres,  
A travers le ramage et le feuillage sombre  
Je vis leurs yeux d'écouter.

Mon ame est une fleur pour en venir à l'été;  
La vie est le bonheur pour venir à l'été;  
Sauter/j'ai de l'air pas, sauter je pense l'air en l'été;  
Sauter.



calendars  
this door

inside

Non ce n'est point d'ailleurs quelle est en l'air, pour aller  
L'homme regardant encore en l'air, en l'air, en l'air;  
Non, c'est d'ailleurs, en l'air, en l'air, en l'air;  
Quand l'homme en l'air, en l'air, en l'air, en l'air;  
Mais en l'air, en l'air, en l'air, en l'air.

Film can render this mysterious elsewhere palpable by means of camera movements, but Woodman needs no more than a skillfully selected field of view. And where the cinema adds another spatial dimension by bringing in sound, the photographer resorts to writing: beneath one of her pictures, which shows a corner of a room with a rack and two doors (fig. 4), she has written the words "calendars inside this door."<sup>6</sup> The caption insinuates an enigmatic *hors-champ* said to be located behind or, more precisely, *inside* the door. What makes the note even more unsettling is the fact that it speaks of "this door," when the picture clearly shows two doors. So inside which of these doors are the calendars supposed to be? Not only does the *hors-champ* hide behind a closed door—we do not even know which door it hides behind. We cannot properly say of the disturbing presence of the out-of-field, Deleuze wrote, whether it exists—rather, it insists. The same is true here: the outside is there, present by virtue of the inscription and yet impossible to locate. It lurks behind a door, but we do not know behind which one.

It is this insistence of the paradoxical beyond that renders even a seemingly plain picture like the shot of a corner of a room profoundly disconcerting (cat. 13, p. 124). In this instance, the mysterious out-of-field is present not in one but in two ways: there is, on the one hand, the blazing light streaming in through the windowpane, which does not let us see what is outside in the

bright light of day; and, on the other hand, the darkness looming from the nook beneath the drywall construction; we cannot know how far this darkness extends. In one of the most sinister scenes in David Lynch's movie *Lost Highway*, the protagonist disappears into the shadow cast by the bedroom door and fails to reemerge; the dark cranny in Woodman's picture similarly threatens to be a passage to a realm beyond space and time. This violent breakthrough to the outside has left traces on the floor in the form of fragments that bear witness to the breach of the protective barrier between here and there, inside and outside, the real room and nowhere.

From this perspective, the role of the artist's body should be read differently as well: when Woodman shows herself in her pictures, she not only uses the rooms to stage herself and her body. The converse is also true: the artist uses her own body to illustrate the unusual spatial qualities of her scenes. The body is the medium that allows us to experience space, as in the famous picture that shows Woodman raising her hands like an enchantress as though she were opening a door by sheer force of suggestion (cat. 12, p. 122), behind that door, a bottomless dark *hors-champ* once again looms. Whether the photographer withdraws behind the wallpaper (cat. 34, p. 166), crawls around angles in a wall (cat. 58, p. 216), slips behind the fireplace mantel (cat. 31, p. 160), or burrows into the ground (cat. 9, p. 116); her body incessantly serves to transcend spatial antitheses, positioning itself at the precarious interface between inside and outside, between in-front-of and behind.

One of her pictures (cat. 37, p. 172) shows a Dutch door, a wooden door whose upper and lower panels may be opened separately. Woodman has pushed the top half open so that we see her upper body. Her legs, however, are concealed by the bottom panel of the door. The result is an intriguingly unreal picture, as though it were a product of photomontage with the upper half of the artist's body pasted into a shot of an empty room. As in the legendary variety act in which a woman is sawn in half, her body seems to have been cut apart by magic. Looking more closely, we recognize that a sliver of the lower half of her body is visible as well: a piece of her skirt protrudes from the narrow crack between the bottom door panels. Her upper body already leans into the interior, while her lower body is just barely held back by the door. The body as a whole accentuates the spatial barrier of the door while also transcending it. Neither entirely here nor entirely there, this body is simultaneously inside the room and outside, at the door.

In one of Woodman's video works, we can only vaguely discern the photographer's silhouette behind a white paper screen. Her hand, meanwhile, writes her name on the paper, then rips it apart to reveal her naked body (fig. 16, p. 31). The moment when the body bursts forth from the paper is no doubt an instant of autopoiesis, or artistic self-creation, but it also and more fundamentally concerns a spatial intervention. The distinction between the area in front of the paper wall and the only dimly visible realm behind it is collapsed as the paper is torn. The out-of-field behind the visual cover erupts on the visible scene. The outside spills into the inside. Another picture that suggests a similar reading shows a large piece of paper hanging from the wall and extending across the floor with holes from which vegetable heads

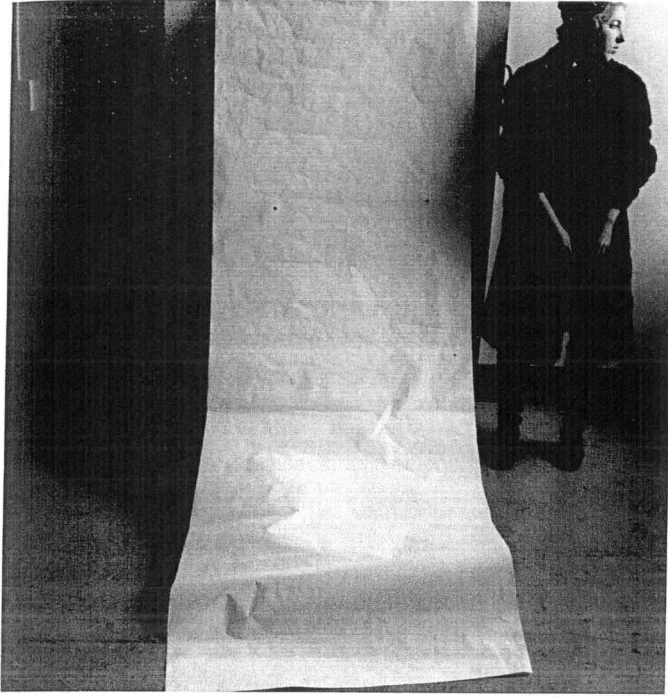


Fig. 5 Francesca Woodman, *Spring in Providence #1*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976, black-and-white gelatin silver print on barite paper

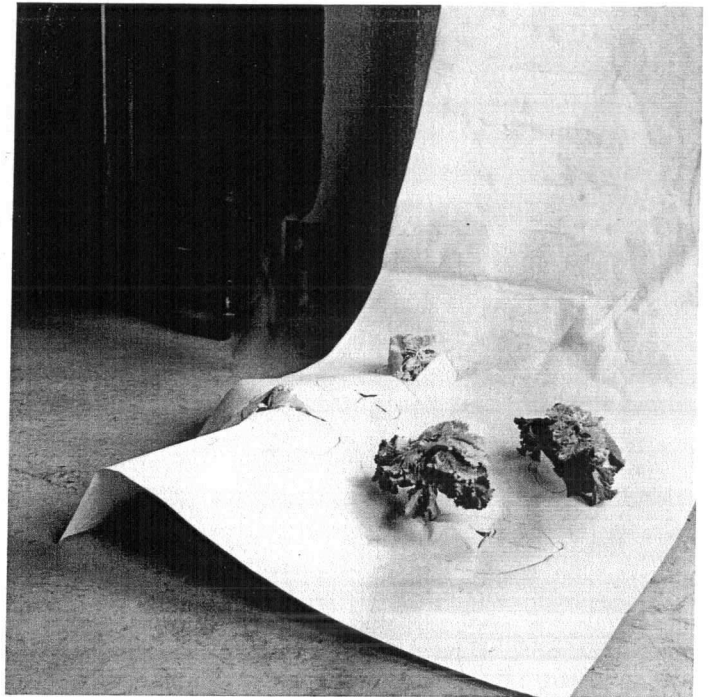


Fig. 6 Francesca Woodman, *Spring in Providence #4*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976, black-and-white gelatin silver print on barite paper

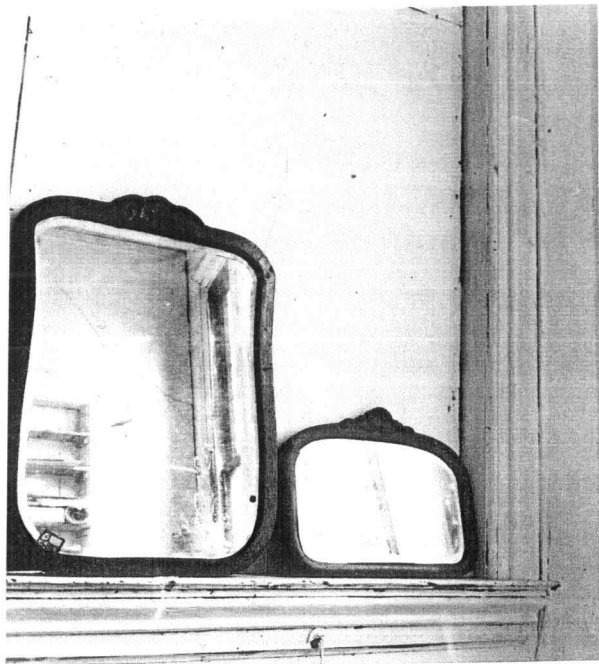
stick out (figs. 5, 6). What was hidden beneath the paper now mushrooms into the foreground. Organic growth links the in-front-of to the behind.

In topology, a branch of mathematics, spatial situations in which such displacements take place and the fundamental laws of geometry are suspended are called “not orientable.” In topological constructions like the Möbius strip, the ends of a paper strip are joined so that the recto connects to verso and vice versa. Top and bottom become indistinguishable. With the Klein bottle, the inside is at once the outside: to pour water from this bottle is to pour water into it. We could refer to these topological figures as *Some disordered Interior Geometries*—the title of the artist’s book Woodman published shortly before her death (fig. 9).

Similarly, Woodman’s body and its image may not be the primary objects motivating her obsessive occupation with mirrors and reflections, which may instead be read as a technique of dis-orientation, a subtle method of creating disorder among the “interior geometries.” We often forget that the mirror reflects not only the human figure but also the space around it. What is more, when we do not stand right in front of the mirror, we see the surroundings but not ourselves reflected in it. The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan insisted on these spatial effects of the mirror. His widely known essay “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience”<sup>7</sup> is often quoted by writers trying to explain the identificatory power of mirror images. Lacan, however, argued that those who commented on his theory fundamentally misunderstood it, allowing themselves to be taken in by the fascination of the images of bodies reflected in the mirror. Much more important, he claimed, were those borderline phenomena that

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” in *Écrits: A Selection* (London, 1989), pp. 1–8.





Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976, black-and-white gelatin silver print on barite paper



Fig. 8 Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975–1976, black-and-white gelatin silver print on barite paper cat. 26

the mirror reveals, as it were, along its edges: "A mirror does not stretch out to infinity . . . [In] the article from which this schema is taken, I take into account the limits of the mirror; one can see something in this mirror from a point situated, as one might say, somewhere in the space of the mirror, from which it is not perceptible by the subject. In other words, I myself do not necessarily see my eye in the mirror, even if the mirror helps me to see something that I would not see otherwise . . . fascinated by the content of the mirror, you forget its limits."<sup>8</sup>

By extending space in paradoxical fashion, the mirror reveals something that we could never see directly. The out-of-field, what is beyond the scope of our own gaze, is folded, we might say, into the field of perception by the mirror. One of Woodman's picture series shows her crawling past a mirror set on the floor (cat. 58, p. 216), which allows us to see a piece of the half of the room that is on the other side—or in other words, behind the camera—rendering the geometry of the interior space, mysterious as it is, even more confusing. By containing a fragment of what is actually on the opposite side of the room, it profoundly upsets our sense of orientation. Here and there, near and far are suddenly interlaced in the photographic rendition. Woodman's topological sceneries thus turn out to be settings in a twofold sense: a "setting" is here not just the place one observes, it may also designate the place from which one observes. In the mirror, such previously contrary positions coincide: to regard is at once to be regarded, the place from which we look is identical to the place we behold.

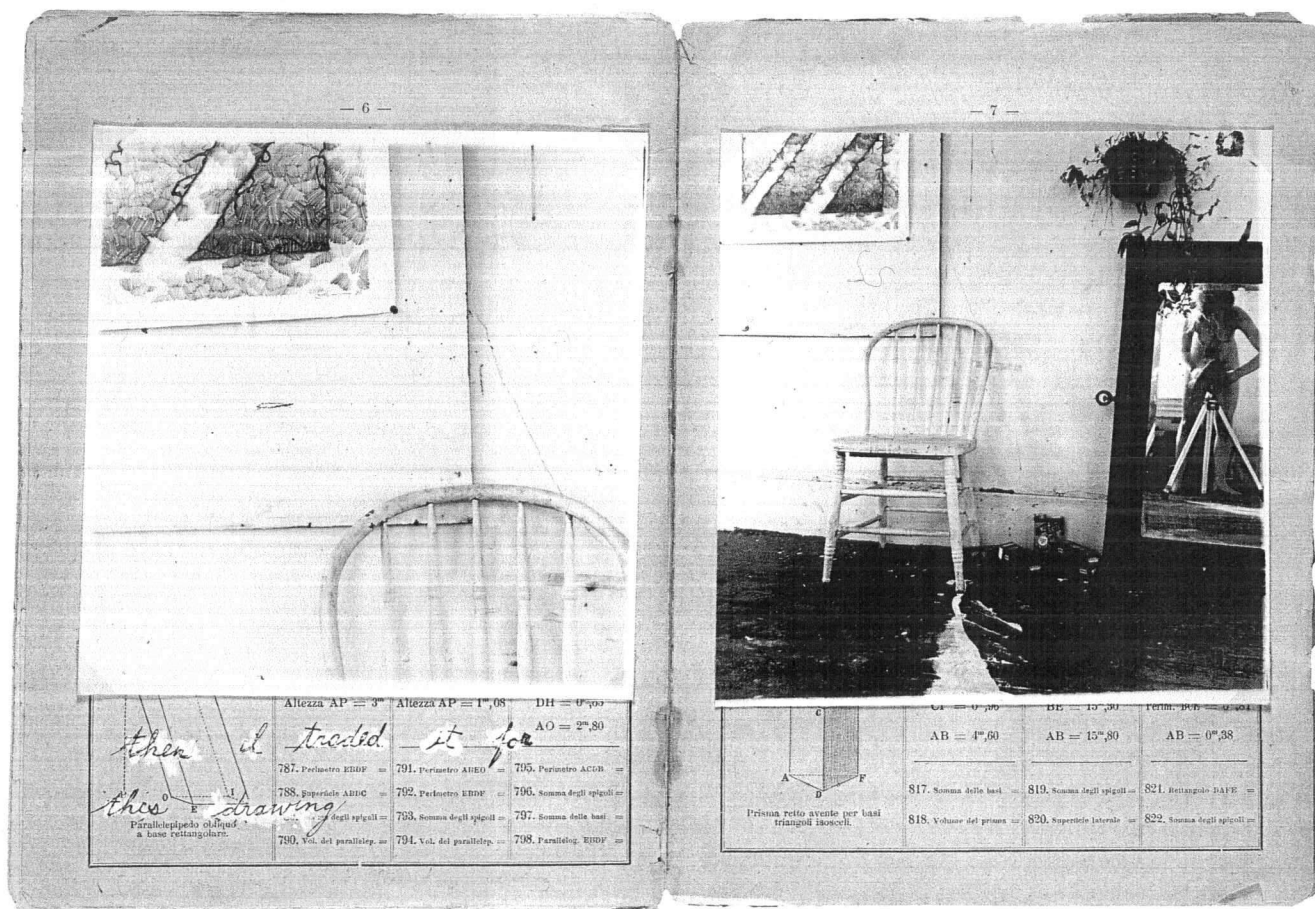
8 Jacques Lacan, "The Seminar: Book X: Anxiety" [1962–1963], <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Book-10-Anxiety.pdf>, p. 65 (accessed June 2013); cf. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre X: L'angoisse* (Paris, 2004), p. 89.

9 See Peggy Phelan, "Francesca Woodman's Photography: Death and the Image One More Time," *Signs* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2002), pp. 979–1004, here p. 987f.

Woodman's photographs themselves must be conceived as such specular settings in which the spatial order is disordered, as is suggested by the picture showing two mirrors on a ledge with a row of photographs pinned to the wall above them (fig. 8; cat. 26, p. 150). The arrangement equates the mirrors and the photographs. Yet whereas human figures are recognizable in some of the pictures, the mirrors reflect nothing but the facing wall with a shelf. That is exactly what Woodman's photographs would ultimately seem to be about: as with a mirror, their purpose is to fold this empty space devoid of people, this out-of-field located beyond the camera and the artist, into the field of view (fig. 7).

In her nuanced and perceptive essay on Woodman, Peggy Phelan argues that the photographer's pictures constitute an extension of sorts of the *fort-da* game Sigmund Freud describes in his essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle."<sup>9</sup> Just as Freud's grandson throws a wooden reel with a piece of string tied to it out of his cot and then pulls it back in order to play through—and cope with—his mother's leaving and reappearing, Phelan writes, Woodman is playing a *fort-da* game with the image of her own body, one that may already anticipate her own death.

Fig. 9 Francesca Woodman, *Some disordered Interior Geometries*, New York, 1980–1981, pages from artist's book



Yet the *fort-da* game in Freud is also a game of here and there: now the reel is inside the cot, now it is outside. By taking possession of the reel of yarn, the child creates a psychological space that opens and closes, in which the subject is in one moment outside and in the next inside. In this regard, the reel proves to be an exemplary “transitional object”:<sup>10</sup> it not only makes the transition between his mother’s presence and her absence bearable for the child, it also establishes a psychological space of transition in which inside and outside are no longer neatly separated, but instead perpetually pass into one another.

Freud sought to capture this paradoxical psychological spatiality in the wonderful image of a “foreign land within.”<sup>11</sup> It is the processes within us that are the strangest to us. Lacan will later describe this psychological spatiality with an even more felicitous term: the neologism “*extimité*.”<sup>12</sup> A fusion of *intimité* and *extérieur*, it contradicts all conventional conceptions of the life of the soul as an intimate and inward process. On the contrary, Lacan argues, what is most intimate is radically exterior and dissociated, whereas apparently external discourses such as linguistics or mathematics directly inscribe and manifest themselves in the unconscious. As *extimacy*, the soul perpetually hovers between inside and outside and resides here and there at once. Woodman’s pictures likewise illustrate such *extimate* situations in which the outside is inscribed in the inside and, conversely, the *hors-champ* emerges in the field of the visible. Woodman’s pictures themselves are *extimacies*—they are *intimate* particularly in their depiction of *exterior* spaces.

In one of Woodman’s video works the shaky handheld camera records a corner of a room (fig. 10). The corner as such is already an empty and dead space—an out-of-field zone. Yet as though that were not enough, another *hors-champ* inscribes itself in this marginal place: coming from outside the picture—from the out-of-field’s out-of-field, as it were—water drips into the corner. We will never see its source. Then the camera zooms and pans back and we see the legs of the artist holding the camera. Only now do we realize that her right foot has always been in view, cropped by the edge of the picture. Seated outside the field of view in the *hors-champ*—it is this position that enables her to make her pictures in the first place—the artist has always been a part of the void that she captured in her images. The viewer has always been inside the void she beheld.

This insight lends new significance to the disappearance of Woodman’s own body that many of her pictures stage. Yet is the artist truly lost when her body disappears from the room? Is not this absence of the body, which highlights the pure presence of space, in fact the ultimate token of artistic autonomy? Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* is a book that Woodman is said to have read and perhaps cherished.<sup>13</sup> In it, Woolf argues that it is indispensable for the (female) artist to have a room of her own, literally as well as figuratively speaking: a place within the cultural discourse, but also a retreat in which her own creativity can find expression. Yet Woolf’s title permits a second and less familiar reading as well: “A room of one’s own” may

- 10 See Donald W. Winnicott, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena” [1953], in *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis* (London, 1975), pp. 229–42.
- 11 Sigmund Freud, “Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis: New Series,” in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (London, 2011), p. 52.
- 12 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* [1959–1960] (New York, 1988), p. 139. See also Jacques-Alain Miller, “Extimité,” in Mark Bracher et al., eds., *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society* (New York, 1994), pp. 74–87.
- 13 See Harm Lux, “Roads of Access to Francesca Woodman’s Work,” in *Francesca Woodman: Photographische Arbeiten / Photographic Works*, exh. cat. Shedhalle Zürich, Westfälischer Kunstverein (Cologne 1992), p. 6.

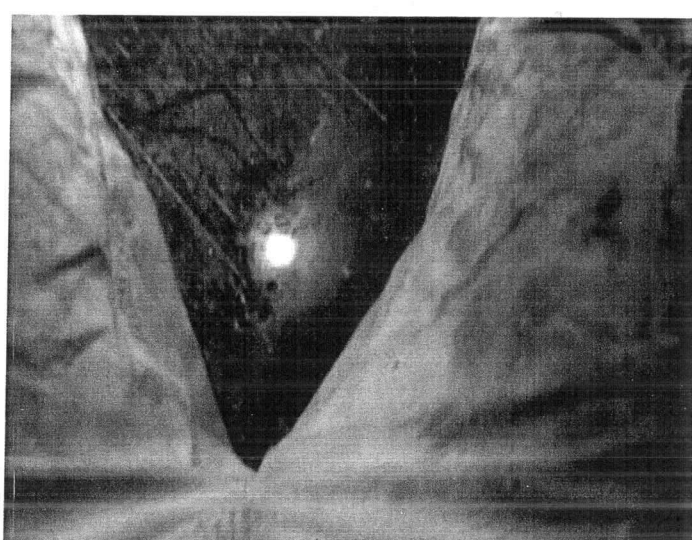
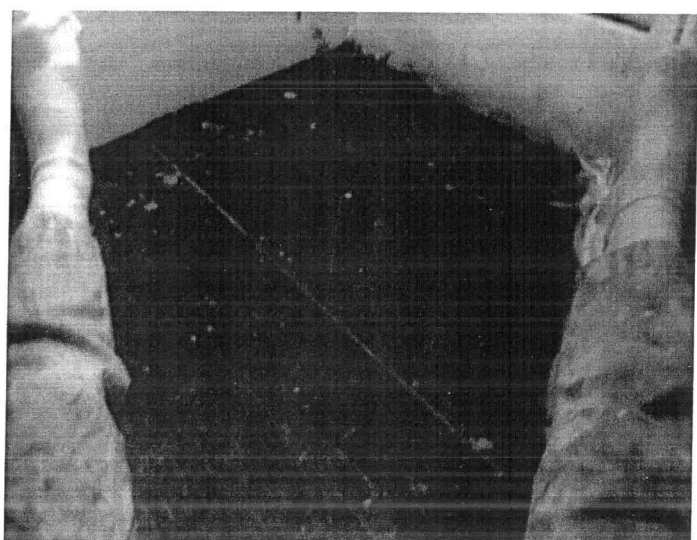
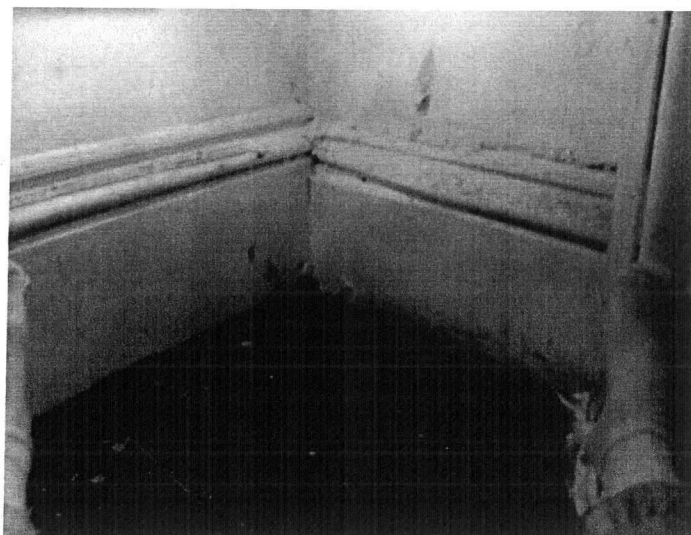
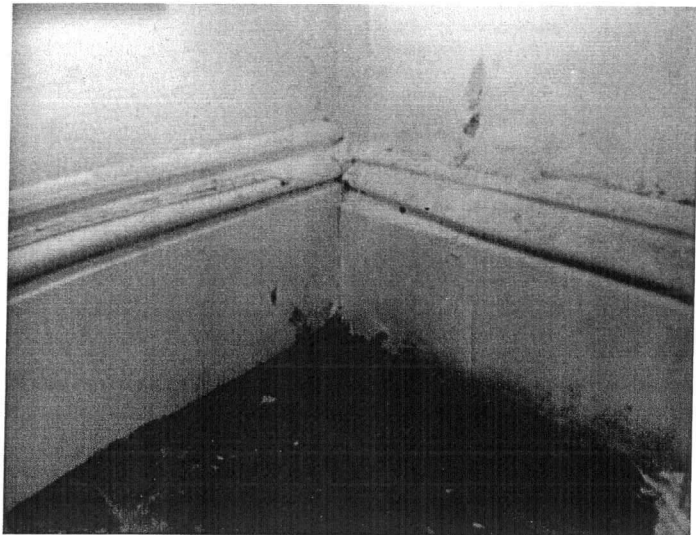


Fig. 10 Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976–1978, video stills, black and white, sound

be taken to refer not only to the artist's "own room," but also to a "room of her own self." The room is not just a place for the subject to inhabit, but rather the room *is* the subject. This second reading is what comes to the fore in Woodman's photographs. Her own "I" becomes manifest in the very spaces these images show. However insistently the artist banishes her body from her rooms, she remains present in the rooms themselves and their "disordered interior geometries." The obscure and topologically twisted chambers are the artist herself, they are "rooms of her own." Francesca Woodman is enshrined—absent yet insistent—in the empty spaces of her pictures.

# FRANCESCA WOODMAN

Works from the SAMMLUNG VERBUND

Edited by

Gabriele Schor | Elisabeth Bronfen

Essays by

Betsy Berne | Johannes Binotto | Elisabeth Bronfen  
Gabriele Schor | Abigail Solomon-Godeau | Beate Söntgen



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Edited by Gabriele Schor and Elisabeth Bronfen

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Francesca Woodman, *Self deceit #1*, Rome, Italy, 1978/1979

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Francesca Woodman in her studio, Pilgrim Mills, Providence, Rhode Island, 1976–1978

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Francesca Woodman, ca. 1979–1980

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#### Back cover illustration

Francesca Woodman, *Untitled*, Providence, Rhode Island, 1975–1976 cat. 26

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